

CHAPTER 4

THE CORNELL SHOOTING

One evening we were all summoned to a meeting in Marge's pub, The Lion. There were two bars there, one of which was frequented by local police. They would be on one side and we would be on the other. Ronnie always told Marge to give them a drink.

He had been drinking very heavily by the time we arrived. Ian and I were the first to walk in, and Ronnie got us a drink. A few seconds later Reggie walked in with two more members of the firm. He didn't look pleased, and went straight over to where Ronnie was standing by the bar.

'What do you want everybody here for?' he demanded.

'I am having a party, that's why,' Ronnie answered.

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Nothing more was said. As I stood there I thought to myself : ‘Christ, he has started early, it’s only seven o’clock.’

By this time the pub was starting to fill up with people, who were mostly strangers to me. Ronnie went over to a couple of them and put his arm round their shoulders and whispered something to them. He then called out to the bar in general that he was going somewhere else for a drink, and he told them to stay where they were until he got back. We all looked at each other. Ronnie seemed drunk but it was unusual for him to act so aggressively so early in the evening.

‘Who’s got a car with them?’ Ronnie called out. In fact, only about three or four members knew how to drive.

When nobody answered he called out for Connie, another member of the firm – a married man who collected protection money. ‘Ain’t that bastard here yet?’ he shouted. ‘He’s always late getting here when I want him – he’s always poncing around with other bastards.’

Then he called out to me: ‘Have you got your car parked outside?’

Very reluctantly I said, ‘Yes.’ There was no point my arguing with him. He was the Al Capone of

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London and he knew it. When he snapped his fingers everybody jumped.

While all this was going on, Reggie was still in the room upstairs but he came down into the bar and Ronnie went over to him and whispered something. He didn't say where he was going to anybody else in the pub, but he started walking to the door so I followed him to get the car.

He turned around at the door and shouted over to Ian, who was standing at the bar talking, 'You'd better come with me, you can keep me company.'

When we were settled in the car, I asked him where he wanted me to take him.

'Drive round to Vallance Road,' he answered.

When we got there, he got out of the car rather unsteadily. 'Wait here a minute,' he told us.

He went into the house and I said to Ian: 'He is in a fucking bad mood tonight. Where does he want us to go?'

'I don't know,' said Ian. 'You know he never tells anybody anything.'

Ronnie then came out of the house and got back into the car.

Before I started the engine I said: 'Where do you want me to take you?'

'Take me to the Blind Beggar,' he replied.

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‘Where’s that?’ I asked. It wasn’t one of the pubs we normally frequented.

‘Drive up to Whitechapel and turn left at the lights, then go up to the next set of lights and go straight over.’

When we got over the lights, he made me do a U-turn to go back again. Then he said: ‘When you go over the lights stop at the bank on the corner.’

By doing this we had passed the pub once and now approached it from the opposite direction. I parked the car outside the bank, opposite the Blind Beggar pub.

I asked him what time he wanted me to pick him up, assuming that he was going to drink in that pub all evening.

‘I want you to stay here!’ he said aggressively. ‘I shall only be a short time.’

I told him that I might have to pull away from there as it was still early evening and the traffic on the main road was very heavy. He scowled and kept complaining that nobody was loyal to him.

Just before he got out of the car, he handed a small object, which looked like a gun, to Ian. ‘Keep that in your pocket,’ he told him, ‘just in case I need it.’

It wasn’t at all unusual for him to hand over a gun

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to one of the firm to carry for him. He always said that one day there would be someone wanting to shoot him, and he wanted to be prepared. But Ian's face turned white. As far as I knew he had never held a gun before. As they walked across the road to the pub, I settled down in the car prepared for a long wait. I knew from experience that Ronnie's five minutes could be anything up to an hour. But this time I was wrong. Within five minutes they were out of the pub and walking back to the car. They both got in the back seat and I was told to take them to Marge's pub.

'That was a quick visit,' I thought to myself. As I was driving back the whole area of Whitechapel came alive with the sounds of police sirens blaring, and several police cars passed me at top speed. Ronnie leaned over from the back of the car and, with his hand on my shoulder, said, 'There must have been an accident.' He then started to laugh loudly.

I looked at them both in my mirror. Ian sat there like a stone. He was just staring out of the window and he did not speak a word. I felt at that moment that something was very wrong – they were both acting so strangely. Ian's face was as white as a sheet and Ronnie kept laughing and talking to himself,

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repeating over and over again: 'I have done it at last, I have done it!'

I was much too concerned about Ian to ask what had happened. So I kept quiet and just drove back to the pub. When I pulled up outside, we all got out of the car without a word. Ronnie rushed right into the pub and hurried upstairs to one of the rooms without speaking to anybody, and Ian and I walked over to the bar and had a couple of drinks.

I whispered to him: 'What happened back there?'

I could see he was in a state of shock. He either couldn't or wouldn't tell me what had happened in the Blind Beggar.

There must have been about thirty or forty people in our bar. I did not know half of them, but I noticed there were a couple of the local police in the other bar.

Before Reggie went upstairs he came over to where Ian and myself were standing. 'Where did you take him?' he asked. He was looking very worried.

'To the Blind Beggar,' I answered.

'Who was in there?' he asked.

'I don't know,' I replied. 'He told me to stay outside.'

Then he turned to Ian: 'What happened?'

Ian took him to one side and whispered something to him. I sensed that there was something wrong because Reggie looked flustered and ran upstairs.

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While they were upstairs somebody came into the bar and shouted excitedly: 'There has been a shooting in Whitechapel Road!'

At that moment the people who had been summoned to the pub for a party must have put two and two together, because they left the pub very discreetly and very quickly. By this time, after a couple of drinks, Ian had got a bit of colour back in his face and he told me that Ronnie had shot someone in the pub that evening.

'Did you shoot anybody?' I asked Ian.

'Of course I didn't,' he answered. 'I just fired the gun in the air, the one he gave me in the car.'

'Did he also have a gun?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Do yourself a favour,' I told him, 'and go home. I will come over to your place later.'

He shook his head and said, 'I can't.'

Just then Reggie came downstairs. He looked around to see how many had left the bar. He could see that the pub had emptied and by the look on his face I could see that he wasn't pleased. He looked over to the other bar where the local police often drank, but they had gone. He told those of the firm who were still in the bar that Ronnie had shot Cornell. What happened to Cornell could have

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happened to anybody that night. I did not know the man personally, but others on the firm sometimes had drinks with him. Although he was based in the East End, he was a friend of the Richardson gang, rival villains from South London. About a couple of days earlier, Ronnie had been told that Cornell had been going round making snide remarks about him behind his back. 'A fat pouf' was one of the things he'd been calling him.

When Ronnie came down, he saw that his so-called friends, whom he had invited to a party, had all gone, but he was composed by now and fully in control again. I looked at him and thought, 'How could he be so calm after just shooting someone?'

He called over a man named Charlie and handed him a carrier-bag. 'Take that out and get rid of it. Don't come back here – just go straight home and we will be in touch.'

Charlie was out of the pub in a flash.

The remainder of the firm were told to go to a pub in the High Street in Stoke Newington called the Coach and Horses. This was another one of the firm's meeting-places. The pub was quite a large one and managed by a very nice friend of mine, whom we used to call Blondy Bill and who didn't like the idea of the firm using his place for meetings but, like

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everyone else, had no option; quite simply, he didn't want any trouble.

On our way over to the pub I said to Ian: 'Now you are in trouble. You have been with Ronnie and he has shot someone. He may even have killed him. What fucking chance have you got to get out of this? If he goes down, you will go down with him. If I was you I'd have it away – you know you will get no help from anybody.'

Ian made no comment. I think he was still too shocked at what had taken place.

When we arrived at the pub plans were already being put in motion to hide Ronnie. Nobody seemed to care about Ian. I could see he was out in the cold after being involved with a shooting done by somebody else. That night Ronnie went into hiding. He was taken to one of the many hide-outs that were available for any emergencies. Now Reggie was in charge.

The next meeting was in the house of a friend of the firm's in Walthamstow. It was over all the newspapers that there had been a shooting and by then most of the people who lived in the East End had guessed that Ronnie had shot Cornell. The firm were feeling very uneasy and talked amongst themselves about what had happened at the Blind

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Beggar. They thought it was only a matter of time before Ronnie got arrested. A few of them decided that they had had enough of this way of life and took the opportunity of getting out during all the commotion. With Reggie worrying about his brother he never paid much attention to what every member of the firm was doing. I stayed put because of my concern for Ian.

The remaining members of the firm kept in touch with each other, and messages were carried backwards and forwards between the hide-out and the pub where we drank. One evening I was told to get hold of Ian as I was the only one who knew where he lived and had promised him I would tell no one. He lived with his girlfriend, but the twins were worried that if he was seen, he would be picked up by the police. This was something they had to avoid, for Ronnie's protection.

I drove over to his flat in North London and knocked on his door. It seemed a long time before anybody answered. I saw the curtain move and then the door was opened by Ian. I followed him up the stairs.

'You are wanted,' I said. 'I have got to take you over to Walthamstow because they want you to go away, out of London for a few days.'

Ian was a bit apprehensive. 'Wouldn't it be better

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if I stay where I am? You're the only one who knows where I live.'

I thought for a moment, then I suggested: 'If you don't want to go, I will go back and tell them that I can't find you.'

'No,' he replied, 'I had better come with you. They will see me all right.'

I looked at him. 'I think you had better be on your guard at all times. Just remember that you are an eyewitness against them and don't forget the old saying, "Blood is thicker than water". If you don't want to go I am quite prepared to drive you up to Scotland until Ronnie gets nicked.'

'Don't worry,' Ian replied. 'If I think that anything is going to happen, I will get out quick.'

We got in the car and I dropped him off outside the hide-out. As he got out of the car I said, 'Don't forget what I have told you.'

A few days passed and I heard nothing from Ian, so I went round to see his girlfriend. She was very upset and crying. 'Where's Ian? I haven't seen him for two days. He hasn't been back since he left a note saying he had gone somewhere with you.'

'Are you sure he hasn't been in touch?' I asked.

'Yes,' she answered, 'I wouldn't be here crying if I knew where he was.'

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I tried to reassure her, then I left, saying I would be in touch. I drove over to the house in Vallance Road, where Reggie was holding his meetings.

‘Where is Ian?’ I asked him. ‘I have just left his girlfriend. She is very worried and doesn’t know where he is. She might go to the police. She loves him – we had better give her some kind of reassurance.’

Reggie nodded. ‘You know we are trying to keep this as quiet as possible. We’ve managed to get them both out of the country for a few days.’

I got a feeling that he didn’t completely trust me because he knew that Ian and I were close friends. He told me that he and Ronnie were on their way to the villa of an old-time gangster friend of theirs abroad. He added that Ian had left a message for his girlfriend and that he would be back in a few days’ time.

Nothing went right while they were in hiding. The firm could not get their hands on any money – it seemed as though everybody had decided to stay away from the clubs, and money was tight. The managers just kept making excuses. We all kept away from Vallance Road, too, on orders from Reggie, although he did arrange for two of the lesser members of the firm to stay there – one of whom was a married man with a family, who objected to this, but he had no option but to go.

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Somebody got in touch with Reggie through the East End grapevine and told him that the barmaid from the Blind Beggar could be a threat to Ronnie. He sent a message to the manager and asked him to meet him at another meeting place. The manager was very reluctant to meet him, but he was persuaded.

Reggie told him that he was sorry about what had happened in his pub. He asked if the barmaid was all right. The manager said: 'She will keep her mouth shut. The police interviewed her and she didn't tell them anything.'

Reggie looked relieved. 'Tell her to keep it that way. There will be a few quid sent round to her if she keeps to what she has already told the police.'

We waited, thinking that Ronnie would be arrested at any time, but nothing happened.

When Ronnie came back to the East End his position was even stronger and he really became 'The Godfather'. He started to make himself busy again, and called a meeting.

'Nothing has been done all the time I've been away,' he said, in true Al Capone style. 'The Cornell thing is finished, no bastard will do me for it now.'

However, they did find out later that there were two more witnesses to the shooting; they were two

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businessmen who called in at the pub on their way to play cards. They were warned off by the firm. Time passed and we all started to forget about the shooting. I felt, though, that the police must be building up a dossier on our activities because the local officers were not around drinking in the pubs as much as before. Perhaps they had been told to keep a low profile to prevent the firm getting wise to the fact that the Regional Crime Squad was interested in them.

CHAPTER 5

NOBBY SCAPEGOAT

Now that the Cornell shooting was forgotten, at least as far as the firm was concerned, and now that Ronnie was fully back in control, a lot of club owners who had not paid their dues when he was in hiding were now too scared to refuse. They realized that the firm was led by two of the most ruthless gangsters in London, who never ever forgot anybody who managed to break away.

One man who did break away, paid a price. He left the firm and started his own business quite successfully. We knew him as Nobby. He was always smartly dressed and smoked big cigars and he never came in contact with the firm unless he was sent for. He was a very good friend of 'big brother Charlie'.

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The firm summoned him one evening. ‘We need some readies,’ he was told. ‘We have been checking up on you and we know that you have been doing very well lately. We haven’t bothered to ask you before, but now is the time to prove your friendship.’

He was another one of the many who were wary of the twins and it showed on his face. He told them that ‘things were bad’ and he had ‘no cash to spare’, but he had a warehouse full of different types of merchandise that would fetch quite a lot of money into the firm if it could arrange for transport to pick it up. The warehouse was in Kent.

I felt sorry for him. Here was a man who was handing over his stock and could do nothing about it. I knew that he would not dare to go to the police, even if he wanted to – he had a wife and children and he was scared of what might happen.

In the days that followed we had to find out if any of the small-time crooks that we could trust had a large van and wanted to earn some ready cash. That was easy, there was one man who always wanted to work for the firm. He was a loner, a bit of a drunk and an occasional drug-user. He was also a small-time crook who had served time in prison and he would be more than willing to do something in order to be one of the firm. His name was Jack McVitie but

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we all knew him as Jack the Hat. He got the name through always wearing a hat – he was never seen without one.

I was sent to a club in Dalston, North London, run by four brothers. ‘Is Jack the Hat in tonight?’ I asked when I went into the foyer.

One of the brothers said, ‘Yes, he is fucking drunk as usual. He is downstairs.’

I made my way down to the basement bar to see him and told him that the twins wanted him to do a favour. ‘It could be a good earner for you. If you are interested I will pick you up tomorrow night and take you to the pub and they will tell you what they want you to do.’

He agreed, and I said: ‘I will pick you up at about six-thirty. Make sure you are sober.’

I picked him up at his house in Forest Road, East London, as arranged. I drove him to where he had to meet the firm and when we walked into the pub he got so excited that they had actually sent for him to do a job for them. He was asked if he could get a van and take it to Kent to pick up some merchandise from a warehouse.

‘Yeah! Yeah! Of course I can,’ he said eagerly. ‘What’s in it for me?’

‘We will pay you £200 to pick it up. Here’s fifty

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for expenses – you will get the rest when the job is done,’ they told him. He was handed a piece of paper with the address of where he had to deliver the goods on it.

After all the talking was done and the arrangements made, he wanted to stay in our company, but nobody wanted him to because he was such a bigmouth and most of us knew he couldn’t care less whom he insulted. I managed to get him to leave with me and I dropped him off at one of his favourite haunts.

I went back and Ronnie called me over to one side. ‘I don’t trust him,’ he said.

‘Well, he is the only one you can get to do it on such short notice,’ I replied.

‘I know. That’s why I want you to follow him in your car,’ he said. ‘Just to make sure he picks up and delivers.’

I went home early that night because Jack the Hat was going to leave at five in the morning. I followed him to Kent and sat in my car, unseen by Jack, until he loaded up. Then he made his way back and I drove a short distance behind him. But he knew my car and he must have got suspicious because he drove so fast he made sure he lost me in the traffic. I made my way back to London and went to the twins’ house where

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I told them that I had lost him. Ronnie almost exploded. 'The bastard has double-crossed us. Who the fuck said we could trust him?'

I tried to calm him down. 'Maybe he has already gone to unload the van at the address you gave him.'

Ronnie turned to a couple of the firm who were there. 'Go round to this address,' he told them, handing them a slip of paper, 'and see whether he has delivered the goods. If he hasn't been there, don't come back until you find out where he is.'

After an hour passed they came back. 'He has been there,' they said, 'but some of the gear was missing.'

Much later we were told through the grapevine that Jack had stopped off somewhere on the way back to London and sold some of the goods. He never came back for his £200.

Poor Jack the Hat. That was one bad mistake he should never have made. No one ever double-crossed the firm and got away with it. I think we all knew it would only be a matter of time before they did something about it. There was some talk of shooting him in the legs in case it got around how easy it was to double-cross the firm. But they soon stopped looking for Jack the Hat because they knew it wouldn't be too long before he turned up. He was such an idiot. He kept going round the clubs telling

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people that he had turned the Kray gang over and that they didn't do anything about it.

Soon after this the twins decided to throw a party one evening. It went on into the night and Reggie drank heavily. He got fed up with hearing his brother boasting about the murder of Cornell, that he now assumed he had got away with. All of a sudden Reggie changed the conversation. He said he thought that Nobby had arranged with Jack the Hat to sell some of the gear before it got delivered and was part of the double-cross. I knew that wasn't true – Nobby was not the kind of man to do anything like that. There were other things on Reggie's mind but he was looking for a scapegoat. Nobby was going to be it.

Ronnie was geeing him up: 'Get out and do something to someone,' he said, and Reggie was getting more and more intoxicated. It looked as if we were all in for a bad night. One or two of the firm who were married made excuses to go home. Ronnie kept telling them to stay. No one had the guts to leave when he didn't want them to. They all knew he could and would shoot any one of us just to prove that he was in charge.

By about four in the morning we were all just sitting there. Ian asked Ronnie if he could leave. 'I

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haven't seen my bird for a few days,' he complained. 'Will you drive me home?' he asked me.

I jumped up off my chair – I was only too pleased to get out of the house – but Reggie looked up and interrupted.

'He'll drop you off,' he said, pointing to one of the firm. 'He's got to go home to his wife.'

My heart sank. 'Why can't I take him? I have got to go that way,' I said to Reggie.

'I may need you later,' he answered.

They both left and the relief was clear on their faces as they walked out of the door.

Reggie went into the hall. When he came back into the room he was holding a gun.

'What the hell are you going to do with that?' I asked, looking at him in amazement. He looked very agitated.

'That bastard keeps telling me that he is doing everything. I'll fucking show him.'

There was more screaming and crying from Reggie, which happened when he got in a rage. This was the sort of thing that we were all used to if they were fighting amongst themselves. Nobody would dare to interfere because they would turn on us if we did.

Reggie got on the phone and told the person who answered that he wanted to speak to Wally.

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‘Fetch your van over,’ he told him, then he listened for a moment. ‘I don’t care if you’re bloody busy, get someone else to look after the club.’

He banged the phone down on Fat Wally.

It took him about half an hour to get to the house. I opened the door.

‘What does he want me for at this time of the morning?’ he asked.

I felt so sorry for him – he was shaking like a leaf and he wasn’t even a member of the firm.

‘I don’t know,’ I answered. ‘You had better ask him.’

Reggie asked Wally if he knew where Nobby lived. ‘Yes, I think so,’ he replied, not suspecting anything.

‘I want you to drive me over there because I want to have a chat with him.’

Wally laughed nervously. ‘What, at this time of the morning? He will be in bed. Can’t he take you?’ he asked, pointing to me. ‘I am very busy in the club – I’m the only one looking after it.’

Reggie exploded. ‘Who’s fucking looking after it right now?’ he screamed.

Wally tried to pacify him. ‘I told the barman that I was only nipping out for half an hour and the barman said he couldn’t handle it any longer than that.’

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Ronnie sat through this tirade without saying a word, knowing full well what his brother had in mind.

It was now about five in the morning and I felt that something terrible was going to happen but I was powerless to do anything about it. Now that Wally was there, I said: 'I am going home to get some shuteye,' but Reggie stopped me in my tracks.

'Hang on a minute,' he said. 'I want you to come with me.'

Knowing that he had the gun, I said, 'You don't need me to have a chat with Nobby. Anyway, it's time we all got some sleep.'

Reggie told Wally to go outside and start the van up. Then he turned to me. 'Go out with him,' he said. 'I will be out in a minute.'

When I got outside in the street I said to Wally: 'What on earth made you tell him where Nobby lived? If you had said that you didn't know his address we wouldn't be going over there now.'

'What does he want to speak to him about at this time of the morning?' asked Wally.

'You ask him,' I replied.

Reggie came out of the house wearing a strange smile. 'I will drive,' he said, so Wally moved over into the passenger seat. 'You just tell me how to get to the house.'

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It was very quiet on the streets at that time in the morning, all we passed were some early risers and milk-floats. When we got to the part of London that Nobby lived in, Wally told Reggie to drive down a cul-de-sac and pointed to a block of flats. 'He lives on the first floor,' Wally pointed upwards. 'The one with the blue curtains.'

Reggie turned the van so it faced outwards towards the main road. As he got out of the vehicle, Wally said: 'I'll wait for you here. I'm tired so I will have a kip, because I have been working all night.'

'You had better come with me,' said Reggie, 'you know what door it is.' He looked at me. 'You'd better come too.'

We all got out of the van and walked up the stairs to the first floor.

'Knock on the door,' he told Wally. 'He will come down and open the door if he hears your voice.'

It was then that Wally seemed to realize that he was being used, because he started to sweat. He knocked on the door very softly, but there was no answer. Reggie got impatient and banged hard on the door. After a few minutes a woman's voice called out: 'Who is it? Do you know what time it is?'

'It's Reggie, I want to speak to Nobby.'

She called back: 'He's in bed.'

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‘Tell him to get up,’ Reggie said, ‘it’s important.’
Just then Nobby appeared shouting: ‘I’m coming!
I’m coming!’

He opened the door. ‘What’s wrong? What are you all doing here at this time in the morning? You could have phoned if you needed me for anything.’

Reggie’s voice was quiet. ‘There’s nothing wrong, I just want to talk to you.’

We weren’t invited in, and Reggie said: ‘Tell your wife to go in the kitchen and make a cup of tea.’

The kitchen was situated near the front door so I followed her in. She whispered to me: ‘What is he going to do? Is he going to harm my husband?’

I had only met Nobby’s wife once before, and I thought that she was a very quiet and timid woman. Nobby never brought her to any of the parties that the firm had. I told her that Reggie was in a strange mood but I didn’t think that he would harm his brother’s best friend. I told her that I would go outside and see what was happening.

As I walked out of the kitchen to the front door I saw Reggie take the gun out of his pocket and point it at Nobby. Just a split second before he fired I pushed Nobby to the floor. He went down with a bang and his legs went up in the air. The bullet, which would probably have hit him in the chest, ended up in his foot.

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Wally was so shocked by this unexpected turn of events, he disappeared down the stairs and into the van. I bent over Nobby and whispered: 'Stay where you are. I'll try to get him out.'

Just then his poor wife came running out of the kitchen. 'You bastard!' she screamed at Reggie. 'You have shot my husband!'

I shouted at Reggie that Nobby was badly hurt and he had better get out of there. I knew that my quick actions had saved Nobby's life that morning.

The shot must have been heard all over the building because lights were going on in the other flats. People were opening their doors and shutting them again. As we walked down the stairs we were seen by men who were leaving for work that day. Reggie was such a well-known face in the East End that he must have been recognized by somebody. Yet nobody phoned for the police. If they had, we would surely have been stopped. It was the same as the Cornell shooting – the East End wall of silence went up.

Reggie got into the back of the van and I got in next to Wally, who already had the engine running.

'You had better drive,' Reggie said. 'You know the way out of these flats.'

I could see that Wally was still very nervous: he was driving so fast, it was a miracle that he didn't get

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stopped for speeding. We could hear Reggie talking to himself but couldn't understand a word. Wally couldn't get back quick enough. We were both relieved when we pulled up at the house. It must have been about seven o'clock in the morning. Wally didn't want to go into the house.

'Can I go home now?' he asked.

To his relief Reggie said: 'Yes, go back to the club and keep your mouth shut!'

I thought to myself, poor Wally, now he was like me; involved with no way out.

Ronnie was in bed when we entered the house but he must have heard us drive up.

'Go and tell Ron that I have shot Nobby,' Reggie said to me.

At that moment Ronnie came into the room from his bedroom and heard what Reggie said.

'You fucking bastard!' he yelled. 'Now you have really got us into trouble!'

There was so much shouting going on between them that it is a wonder the police didn't come to see what the noise was all about. Ronnie then took charge, and got on the phone to big brother. Poor Charlie, the only time they called on him was when one of them was in trouble. I am sure he never knew half of what was going on.

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‘Get round here quick,’ he told Charlie. There was a pause while Ronnie listened, then he said: ‘Never mind what time it is,’ and he hung up.

Charlie arrived shortly after and it seemed obvious to him which one of them was in trouble by the look on Reggie’s face.

‘He has shot your mate, Nobby,’ Ronnie said. ‘That bastard has really done it now.’

Charlie looked shocked. ‘What the fuck did you shoot him for? He is a friend of mine.’ He was shouting now, ‘For what reason?’

‘I don’t have to tell you why I shot him,’ Reggie answered.

Charlie looked at the three of us: ‘Some bastard had better tell me,’ he said.

He was pacing the floor, so I decided to butt in. ‘He’s not badly hurt,’ I told him. ‘He only got hit in the foot.’ But I shouldn’t have opened my mouth because it started Reggie off.

‘It should have been his head. He might be your friend, but he’s not mine!’ he screamed.

Charlie was very annoyed and said: ‘I have known Nobby for a long time. He has always been very loyal to us. I don’t care what you do – just leave my friends alone. We had better stop all this arguing and see if the Doc can go round and patch him up.’

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‘The Doc’ had a practice in the East End and he always came out if he was needed.

‘By now the police could be there,’ Ronnie said.

I spoke up. ‘There must have been a lot of people who saw Reggie coming away from the flat.’

Charlie looked straight at me. ‘Who took him round to Nobby’s place?’

I answered, pointing at Reggie. ‘He phoned Wally at the club and ordered him to come and pick him up.’

‘Did you go with him?’ he asked me.

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘I had no option – he was determined to see Nobby last night, or should I say this morning? Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. I’m going home – you know where to get in touch with me.’

I was never told whether the police went round to Nobby, but I assumed they would never have known enough to investigate the matter. Only one good thing came out of all this: the twins never did bother Nobby again.



CHAPTER 6

OUTSIDE CONNECTIONS AND THREATS

There were some lighter moments in our lives. Parties were always popular with the firm – Reggie, in particular, loved a party. Often we would be in a pub, having a few pints accompanied by our wives and girlfriends, and somebody would shout: ‘Let’s have a party!’

Somebody else would reply: ‘OK! Let’s go to my place!’

If it wasn’t someone’s house it might be a private room in a club, like the Regency Club in Stoke Newington. We would have a whale of a time – eating, drinking and dancing till the small hours. No strangers were ever allowed upstairs at the club if we were having a get-together.

We never had parties in Vallance Road. The

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twins' parents lived there of course and I suppose that made things more complicated. I knew both of them quite well: the twins' mother, Violet, was always very welcoming to the firm if we went round there individually and used to lay on plenty of tea and sandwiches (the twins loved their mother's cooking). She was a lovely woman and I liked her very much – as did all the firm. She was discreet, too, and always left the room if we were discussing the firm's business. It was obvious that the twins thought the world of her. They got on less well with their father Charles, however. He was a dealer in second-hand gold and, although I always found him a sociable sort of fellow (like Reggie in that respect) and enjoyed the occasional pint with him, the twins didn't see eye to eye with him.

In the way that everyone has a good side to their personality, the twins had one to theirs. It was not unusual, for example, to see Ronnie handing a couple of quid to elderly East Enders who had approached him in the pub saying they were short of cash. If the twins were asked for a donation to charity, they would give freely. They were especially generous to the clubs helping young up-and-coming boxers. Both of them had been keen boxers in their

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teenage days. In fact, Reggie was still a keep-fit fanatic and used to run regularly round the park next to the house in Vallance Road.

The firm were on very friendly terms with some great stars of the day like Diana Dors and some of the visiting stars from America. Of course, they all knew that we were gangsters, but it seemed to fascinate them being in our company. There was nothing in it for them really, apart from the fact they could say they had been wine and dined by the firm. The twins had entertained the great Judy Garland many times. She really got the red-carpet treatment, being taken to the smartest nightclubs in the West End. There was also a singer over here, singing in the popular nightspots. His name was Billy Daniels. We all arranged to go to Luton where he was appearing. We had a fabulous night. After his act he came and joined us at our table for the rest of the evening – the twins had met him many times before. Lots of well-known celebrities kept on coming up to speak to him, and I had the pleasure of driving him back to the Astor club, a London nightspot, to see a midnight cabaret and have a late meal.

Then there was George Raft, the film star. The firm were all fascinated by him. He was not only

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good looking and immaculately dressed, he was also an excellent host. He used to like being taken around the East End pubs by the twins. He had business interests in a club in London and we went there on many occasions. I could see that Ronnie loved being in his company. He used to say with unaccustomed humour: 'He is only a gangster in his films. I am one for real!'

I was lucky enough to be asked to go to various London pubs with George Raft and Ronnie in the limousine driven by George Raft's chauffeur. Ronnie wanted to show him off. At times I felt like a film actor just walking around with him. These good times soon came to an end, though. He had to go to France, and we thought we would continue to see him when he came back. But unfortunately he was not allowed back into the country because the police believed he was involved with the Mafia. We heard much later that George had died in France. We were very sorry.

Once we were told that we would be going to a mansion house in Saffron Walden, in Essex, one weekend. It was a big place in the country surrounded by acres of woodland and Ronnie had some business to do there. I drove Ron and Ian and the others went in their own cars.

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As we drove into the country Ronnie said: ‘One day, I will have my own mansion down here and I will only have a few of the faithfuls with me.’

We made no comment – none was needed.

When we arrived, Jeff, the owner of the mansion, was there to greet us. I recognized him immediately. He always came to London to see the firm in a white Mercedes and he was always treated like royalty. The other cars arrived just after us and we were all invited in for drinks. There was a lot of small talk, and later, as we walked around the grounds, I asked Ian: ‘What does he really do for a living?’

‘I don’t know, he must have his finger in a lot of pies,’ he answered.

Only Ronnie ever stayed at the house. The rest of us, including Reggie, were booked into a local hotel. Over the weekend we all noticed that we were being tailed by plain-clothes police, but we didn’t know whether they were locals or London officers. It did make us cut the weekend short.

When we arrived back in the East End there was a message for Reggie at the pub where we had all arranged to meet. We didn’t know what it was, but the following morning he phoned me at the card club and said: ‘You will be taking me up West tonight. Be here at about seven o’clock.’

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‘OK,’ I said. Then I went back to where Ian sat drinking tea with Billy. ‘It looks like I won’t see you tonight,’ I said. ‘I have got to go to the West End. At times I wish I didn’t drive, I seem to always be on call.’

I picked Reggie up as planned and I got the same old story that I had heard many times before on other meetings, about how we were going to make plenty of money. This time we were going to meet two Canadians, who were already known to Reggie. They wanted to put a proposition to the firm. When we drove up to the hotel where the meeting was to take place, I did what I had done many times before, driving round, parking the car away from the hotel, and looking around to make sure we weren’t being followed. Every time I went on one of these meetings I got the feeling that I was an extra on a film set making a gangster movie.

We made our way into the hotel and up to the cocktail bar. As we entered a man came over. He was wearing a white raincoat and a trilby hat. He shook hands with us. I asked him how long he had been waiting.

‘Oh,’ he answered, ‘about half an hour.’

As we sat down I noticed a man sitting at the next table, close to us. ‘Is he with you?’ I asked, indicating the man.

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‘Yes,’ said the man in the trilby, ‘but he will stay where he is, he knows all about the business on hand.’

Reggie and I looked at each other and I knew that he was thinking the same as me – that this was a setup. I did not like the atmosphere one bit. It seemed strange that the other man did not want to sit at our table. I ordered drinks and the Canadian spoke about forged stamps and plates. After a while he took an envelope out of his raincoat pocket. ‘This is what we have been talking about,’ he said.

In the envelope were some samples of British saving stamps. He tried very hard to get one of us to handle them, but we wouldn’t, just in case it was a frame.

He then said: ‘They are very good forgeries. You can have a quarter of a million pounds’ worth for as little as £25,000.’

‘Why so cheap?’ Reggie asked.

‘We have so many of them, we want to move them quickly,’ he answered.

Reggie then called the waiter over for more drinks and started the same routine as his brother had when I was with him discussing the Tangiers affair, staring round the bar suspiciously. It was at this point that we suspected that the Canadian had more than one other person with him. We felt that other eyes were

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on us. I could not make up my mind as to whether they were working for the police, or were Canadian villains. We carried on talking as if we were really interested in what they proposed, but Reggie then asked if he could make another meet, because he had to report back to the rest of the firm.

‘It has got to be soon,’ the Canadian said. ‘We will only be here for a few more days.’

He asked Reggie for a phone number where he could get in touch with him.

‘That’s all right,’ Reggie replied, ‘we will be back in two days with our answer.’

The Canadian accepted that and we shook hands with him, but the other guy just looked up and nodded, and as we left the cocktail lounge I still had the feeling that we were being observed.

We made our way back to the car and as we drove back to the East End I said to Reggie: ‘What are you going to do about this meeting?’

He replied, ‘We’ll see what Ronnie says.’

We went to the pub where Ronnie was drinking and told him about the meeting with the Canadian, but with all the mistrust that was being felt at this time, we were told to ‘leave it out’. The Canadian proposition was just another big waste of time.

Now and then, stories filtered to us on the grapevine

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that some Greek villains were moving into the territory that was our domain.

The firm stayed very much on its own territory – the East End and part of the West End – and expected other gangs to do the same. We knew, of course, that other gangs existed – there were, for example, others in East London as well as several Chinese and some South London gangs (of which the Richardsons were the best known). But we had no contact with them, if we could help it.

One night, soon after the Canadian episode, two men with swarthy complexions appeared in one of the pubs that the firm called their own. They walked over to the bar and asked for a drink. One member of the firm must have recognized them from somewhere because he went over to Ronnie and told him they were Greeks from the North London area.

Ronnie got it into his head that they were spying on the firm because suddenly, without any warning, he went straight over to them and started punching them. As usual, some of the firm joined in, and in no time they were a bloody mess. The poor bastards, they were so badly beaten up they had to be taken to the London Hospital.

A few weeks later, another Greek came to the pub

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to meet the firm – but this one made an appointment first. He wanted to make a proposition.

‘If I can say that I am working with the firm, I can command a fair amount of money from the Greek gaming clubs who know your reputation. The firm would get a good percentage out of it.’ He looked round at us hopefully.

Ronnie took an immense liking to this man. He was tall, handsome, in his early thirties and very well dressed. We met him in our pub a few times, then Ian and I went to North London with him to visit some of the Greek-run clubs that he had spoken of. We got on very friendly terms with him, and were allowed into these clubs which normally only let in Greeks.

A few weeks later, Ian and I got a phone call at the card club where we still spent our days. Ronnie wanted to see us right away. We drove over to the house in Vallance Road and he greeted us with: ‘The big Greek has died.’ We were shocked. We found out that he had suddenly had a heart attack.

‘I want you to go round and tell the firm that they have got to go to the funeral,’ he said. ‘I don’t want his crowd to find out he didn’t work for us.’

The funeral was like one you would see in a Mafia film. We were all dressed in dark suits. I can remember

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all the Greek club-owners and friends of his on one side, and the East End gangsters like us on the other. But it didn't do the firm any good after that to try to muscle in on their territory. The Greek club-owners doubled up their minders in all their gaming clubs, making sure that nobody from the East End moved in, and Ronnie told us to keep out of the clubs in the Greek area. 'We don't need any trouble from that direction,' were the words he used. We had met some nice Greek guys, but after that warning from Ronnie, we dropped them all.

The firm weren't so interested when it came to drug dealing. Rumour went round the firm that there was a factory in the country just outside London that was producing purple hearts. They were very powerful pills and in great demand in the West End of London. Some of us were told that if we wanted to get involved with this, we could make a fortune on the black market.

At one of the meetings that we had in the pub, we were asked what our thoughts were on the subject of selling these drugs to the peddlers in the West End. One or two of the firm were sceptical, they started talking among themselves. This was something new to them. We had all been so used in the past to getting our money from the gaming clubs. Now it seemed

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the twins wanted us to get involved in something very dangerous.

We had to be very careful when we criticized the twins because we didn't know whether we could trust each other. From experience, we all knew that things had a habit of getting back to them. If they discovered that anybody was talking out of turn there was trouble. I, for one, was not in favour of dealing with drugs.

Ian said: 'What about Jack the Hat? He knows everybody that handles dope in the West End. Why doesn't Reggie get him to show a few samples and take orders?'

'You had better put it to Ronnie,' someone said. 'We all know that Jack the Hat has already double-crossed the firm with that vanload of gear.'

'Maybe you're right,' said Ian. 'I don't think it would be such a good idea after all even to mention it to him.'

Unknown to us, the pills were eventually handed over to a man not connected with the firm. I only found this out some days later, when I was sitting in the lounge of the house in Vallance Road waiting for Ronnie to get dressed to go out. There was a knock at the door and I went to answer it. A man stood there who was a stranger to me. He asked if Ronnie

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was at home. Just as I was going to call him, he came down the stairs – he looked furious. ‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ he shouted. ‘You had better come in.’

The man followed him into a different room. I shut the street door and went back into the lounge. I heard Ronnie screaming at him. He had brought a small parcel with him and Ronnie called me into the room where they were arguing.

‘Get this bastard out of here quick,’ he yelled, ‘and make sure he puts that parcel down some bloody drain.’

The man started to sweat and shake. He said: ‘But Ron, they are duds. I have had experts testing them – look for yourself.’

He opened a bag. It contained hundreds of round purple objects that looked like pills.

‘I know nothing about them!’ screamed Ronnie.

I gave the man the nod to move out, knowing the kind of mood Ronnie was in. I went outside with him and said: ‘Where are you going to dump them?’

He said: ‘I will get them off my plate quickly.’

I beckoned him to come round the corner with me where there was a drain. We opened it and I said: ‘Put them down there, that way we’ll know they are not on the streets.’

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He dropped them down the drain and I felt relieved now they were destroyed. 'I think you had better keep out of sight until this thing has blown over. You've put Ronnie in a right bad mood,' I told him.

'OK and thanks,' he said.

I went back into the house where Ronnie was still getting ready. He turned to me and asked, 'Do you really think they were duds?'

I looked at him and replied: 'I know nothing about dope and I don't want to. If the law had followed that geezer here we would have been in a lot of trouble.'

Ronnie nodded and asked, 'Did you see him get rid of them?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'We put them down the drain!'

There was no more talk about purple hearts.